

# **The killing of Chokri Belaid in Tunisia: The assassination of hope**

Tuesday 19 February 2013, by [PRASHAD Vijay](#) (Date first published: 12 February 2013).

**The killing of Chokri Belaid stifles the voice of the Left in Tunisia, whose government is kowtowing to Islamist hardliners.**

On February 6, a leader of the Tunisian Left, Chokri Belaid (48), was assassinated. Furore swept the streets of Tunis, where he had been a well-known student leader in the 1980s. Angry protesters attacked the offices of the ruling Ennahda (Renaissance) Party in the mining town of Gafsa, where Belaid was a well-loved lawyer during the miners' struggles in the 2000s. Police fired tear-gas into crowds in Sidi Bouzid, where the Arab Spring began in late 2010. Despite the poor showing of his Democratic Patriot's Movement (and its left-wing allies) in the 2011 legislative elections, Belaid was a widely admired politician. Many had vested their hopes in Belaid to chart a course between the Islamists and the forces of the ancien régime, to build on the momentum that overthrew Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in 2011. That hope is now dampened.

The Tunisian uprising of 2010-11 drew from a groundswell of anger at the neo-liberal policies and kleptocracy of the Ben Ali government. Hawkers and miners, law clerks and street sweepers joined together in an endless occupation of the country's streets. When Ben Ali fled in January 2011, the mobilised forces could not capitalise on the political vacuum. Ben Ali had either thrown the Left into exile or prison and he had not permitted any Left organisation to remain intact. The Islamists were not spared, but they had two advantages: the mosques, where they were able to maintain their networks across the country; and the money, which flowed into Ennahda's coffers from the Gulf Arab states. The Islamists, through their political vehicle in Ennahda, were able to make the most of their advantages and came to political power in 2011. But their victory did not mean that the social forces of the Arab Spring (such as, the miners and the slum-dwellers) had been sidelined. It was to people such as Belaid that they turned, hoping to see the fractured and weak Left forge a credible platform to carry forward their much grander designs on the new Tunisia. It was the dashing of this hope with his assassination that led thousands into the streets, and hundreds to attack the Ennahda offices across the country, including its well-appointed Tunis headquarters.

Tunisia's President Moncef Marzouki condemned the killing, called for calm and tried to insulate the current government from the accusations of being involved in the assassination. It will not work. Belaid's Patriotic Democrats had been a part of a wider coalition called the Popular Front (Al Jabha Chaabia), which included the old Tunisian Workers' Party, whose head Hamma Hammami said the killing was "planned and executed by professionals", somehow linked to the government which showed a "guilty indulgence towards violence".

## **Acts of violence**

Mr. Hammami's comments point to violent acts by the self-styled League for the Protection of the Revolution, whose cadre killed Nida Touns leader Lotfi Nakd in Tataouine in October 2012 and attacked the Tunis headquarters of the UGTT (trade union) in December. Add to this the attacks by

Salafi groups on Islamic shrines such as the Zawiyya (mausoleum) of Sidi Ahmed Ouerfelli in Akouda last year. The government has turned a blind eye to this violence. Such impunity has emboldened hardened elements of the old guard and of the radical Islamists to cut back the potential of the Left. Belaid's assassination must be seen in this larger context, as he himself recognised. The day before his assassination, Belaid was on Nessma TV talking about political assassinations and the rise of violence.

### **Cut down in his prime**

When I first heard the news from Tunisia, my mind drifted back to 1993, when the South African Communist leader Chris Hani (50) was shot dead outside his home in the poorly named neighbourhood of Dawn Park. Apartheid was destined for the history books, and Hani was to play a major role in shaping a progressive role for his country. The killing of Hani was not an innocent act by a deranged white man and his accomplice, a Conservative Party member. The culprits later argued before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that they had acted on the orders of the Conservative Party leadership, but nothing much came of that. The most significant outcome of the assassination of Chris Hani was that a major leader of the Left had been cut down in his prime, leaving the Communists without their standard bearer in the slumlands and working-class districts whose people needed representation more than ever as South Africa created its new social contract. The death of Hani weakened the Communists, which in turn put on mute the concerns of very large numbers of dispossessed.

Belaid's assassination will thwart the ability of the Tunisian Left to take up the mantle for sections of the 2011 revolution whose voices have been silenced in the new electoral map. A wave of unrest in Tunisia over the past couple of months could very well have propelled the Left to a position of strength. On January 22-23, teachers across the country went on strike against the neo-liberal polices, with very high rates of participation in the strike (95 per cent in Tunis, for instance). All this deeply worried not only Ennahda but also the stalwarts of the old regime. As with Hani, Belaid had to go. Belaid's comrade, Hamma Hammami stood at his grave, saying, "Chokri's will is for Tunisia to unite." If Tunisia is to redeem the promise of the Arab Spring, its progressive forces will have to unite. Belaid began the process of unification when he formed the Unified Democratic Nationalist Party; it is now left to his successors to carry forward his task, both in his name and in the name of Chris Hani, two men killed as they tried to take their countries on the path to democracy and equality.

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\* From The Hindu, February 12, 2013:

[http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-assassination-of-hope/article4404688.ece#.URp1gogedd\\_s.gmail](http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-assassination-of-hope/article4404688.ece#.URp1gogedd_s.gmail)

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